

The truthmakers

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D. M. Armstrong

A WORLD OF STATES OF AFFAIRS
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Suppose we have a thing A and a property F, and A has F. But suppose that A has F contingently: A could have lacked the property F even though A existed, even though F existed, or even though both existed together. And suppose that F is an intrinsic property: when something has F, that is entirely a matter of the nature of that thing itself, not at all a matter of its relations to other things. (Fill in an example if you like; but beware lest your example raise irrelevant questions about whether the property you chose really is a property in the fullest sense of the word, and whether it really is intrinsic.)

If we believe D. M. Armstrong, there must then exist a second thing, B. B is entirely distinct from A, and from F, and so from both together; yet B's existence is necessarily connected to whether or not A has F. Necessarily, if A has F, as it does, then B must exist; necessarily, if A had lacked F, as it might have done, then B could not have existed.

That is the central thesis of Armstrong's book *A World of States of Affairs*. It is strange. If two things are entirely distinct, as A and B have been said to be, we want to say that questions about the existence and intrinsic nature of one are independent of questions about the existence and intrinsic nature of the other. Since Melbourne and Sydney are entirely distinct, Melbourne could exist without Sydney, or Sydney with Melbourne, or both of them could exist together, or neither. Possibility is "combinatorial": there are two possibilities for whether or not Melbourne exists, two possibilities for whether or not Sydney exists, and either of the two possibilities for Melbourne can be combined with either of the two possibilities for Sydney. Likewise, possibilities about the intrinsic natures of distinct things are independent: Melbourne could be flat and Sydney could be hilly, or Sydney could be flat and Melbourne hilly, or both could be flat, or both could be hilly. And, likewise, whether Melbourne is flat or hilly is independent of whether Sydney does or does not exist; again, four different cases are possible. Or so we would all think. But how boldly we should extrapolate the lesson of such examples is a disputed matter.

To be sure, the laws of nature establish connections between the existence and the intrinsic natures of distinct things. But Armstrong's necessary connection between A and B is not a merely lawful connection. Armstrong agrees (though not everyone does) that the laws of nature might have been different; indeed, that there might have been no laws at all. But even then, so Armstrong thinks, it still would have been necessary – necessary in the strongest sense of the word – that B exists if and only if A has F.

Why should anyone believe such a thing? There is a good reason, and there is a bad reason. It is the good reason that guides Armstrong. But it is the bad reason that may, all too easily, persuade his readers to drop their guard.

Let us consider the bad reason first. I introduced Armstrong's thesis in a deliberately abstruse and alienating way, refusing to reveal the name that he gives to the thing B whose existence is necessarily connected to whether or not A has F. Now I shall tell you: he says that B is the "state of affairs of A's having F". So his thesis is that, necessarily, the state of affairs of A's having F exists if and only if A has F. Said that way, it suddenly sounds not at all hard to believe – rather, it sounds like the merest truism.

Our teachers used to warn us, rather too often and rather too stridently, not to be bewitched by language. They told us, in particular, to beware of "pseudo-reference": not to be taken in by phrases that superficially resemble referring terms, but that actually play some quite different role in the game of language. The menace of pseudo-reference may be less widespread than we once feared, but that is not to say that it never happens at all. Maybe "the state of affairs of A's

having F" is a pseudo-referring term. Maybe it does not refer to anything at all, so *a fortiori* it does not refer to anything B that stands in remarkable necessary connections to the intrinsic nature of something entirely distinct from itself. In that case, saying "the state of affairs of A's having F exists" might be nothing more than a long-winded way of saying that A has F. Then our "mere truism" would indeed be true; and our comfort in assenting to it would be well explained. But then we would be much mistaken if we read that comfortable pseudo-referential truism in an ontologically serious way, falsely imputing a reference where in fact there is none. By all means assent to the comfortable truism; but unless we can rule out the hypothesis of pseudo-reference, assent to the truism gives us no reason to believe that there exists something B whose existence is necessarily connected to whether A has F.

So much for the bad reason to believe Armstrong's thesis. Now for the good reason, which is Armstrong's own reason. It has nothing at all to do with our offhand assent to the comfortable truism. (Except for this: thanks to the truism, if indeed there were something B whose existence was necessarily connected to whether A had F, then "the state of affairs of A's having F" would be an apt name to confer on B; and accordingly, it is the name Armstrong has chosen. But the availability of an apt name is no proof that there exists something that deserves that name.)

To understand the good reason, we turn to the topic of truth. Statements divide into truths and falsehoods. Some of the truths are necessary truths; set those aside. The rest of the truths are contingent: they are truths that might have been false. Now ask: when a statement S is (contingently) true, *what makes it true?* It wouldn't seem right to say: "Well, S just is true, and that's all there is to it". Rather, we want to say that its truth is a relational property. The world – the totality of all the entities there actually are – makes S true. Or rather, since few truths purport to describe the entire world, some part of the world makes S true. Somewhere within the world, S has a "truthmaker". Something E exists such that, necessarily, if E exists then, S is true. (Or perhaps several

things exist, any one of which would have sufficed to make S true. Each and every cat – at least if it is a cat essentially – is a truthmaker for the statement that something is a cat.)

Armstrong, along with his one-time colleague C. B. Martin, was a pioneer in demanding explicitly that truths must have truthmakers; and in castigating philosophical systems that failed to satisfy this demand. Think, for instance, of a metaphysics that reduces the material world to J. S. Mill's "permanent possibilities of sensation": what, if not the unreduced material world beyond the door, could be the truthmaker for a truth about what sensations would have followed the sensation of opening the door? The point seems well taken, at least so far as this example goes. But why stop there?

Some truths are predications: truths about the properties had by things, in particular about the intrinsic properties contingently had by things. Take the statement that thing A has property F. If it is true, as we supposed it to be, and if we accept Armstrong's general demand that truths must have truthmakers, then this truth must have a truthmaker. Its truthmaker is what Armstrong calls a "state of affairs". Others might call it a "fact". But this word is to be shunned, because it means sometimes a truth, sometimes a truthmaker, sometimes that which might have existed and been a falsehood, sometimes that which would not have existed at all. Call it what you will, a truthmaker for this predication would be something B such that, necessarily, if B exists, then the statement that A has F is true. In other words, such that, necessarily, if B exists, then A has F. And now we are most of the way to Armstrong's thesis.

Why does the truthmaker B have to be wholly distinct from A and from F? Indeed, couldn't it just consist of A plus F? – No; because then B would automatically exist if A and F did. But we stipulated that F was to be a contingent property of A; so it has to be possible for A not to have F even though A and F, both exist. (Or could B consist of some parts of A and F? – No, for much the same reason.) Armstrong does indeed call A and F the "constituents" of the state of affairs B. But that terminology is safe only if we resist all temptation to read "constituent" literally as a synonym for "part".

Or might there be just some part of B, call it B-, that is entirely distinct from A and F? Then A and F and B- jointly would do the job of truthmaking. That hypothesis provides a truthmaker. But now B-, rather than the whole of B, is involved in a strange necessary connection between distinct things: necessarily, given that A and F exist, B- exists if and only if A has F.

Nothing is gained, simplicity is lost. Or might there be two redundant truthmakers, B1 and B2, either one of which would have sufficed to make it true that A has F? Or might it have been possible for something else, B3, to have done the truthmaking, if only B3 had existed? Then our necessary connection between distinct things takes this form: necessarily, there exists either B1 or B2 or B3, if and only if A has F. Again: nothing gained, simplicity lost.

In short, the good reason to believe Armstrong's thesis is that it affords the simplest way, if not quite the only way, of providing truthmakers for predications. If we do not satisfy the demand for truthmakers, there will be nothing much we can say about why these contingent truths are true. We shall just have to say: the statement that A has F is true because A has F. It's so because it's so. It just is. How bad would that be? Would it be just as bad as a parallel throwing-up-of-hands in the case of the alleged truths about permanent possibilities of sensation?

On the other hand, how bad would it be to abandon combinatorialism about possibility, and posit necessary connections between distinct things? That is the price we pay for uncompromising adherence to the demand for truthmakers. Because, sadly, the demand for truthmakers just is a demand for necessary connections.

Another instance of the conflict between combinatorialism and the demand for truthmakers appears when we ask what the truthmaker is for a (contingent) denial of existence: the statement, say, that there are no arctic penguins. The truthmaker for that truth would have to be something that could not possibly coexist with an arctic penguin. Armstrong's world of states of affairs provides a suitable candidate for the job. But do we want there to be any such thing? – Not if we believe, as combinatorialists, that anything can coexist with anything. Worse still, suppose we were such wholehearted combinatorialists as to think it possible that there might have been absolutely nothing at all. It would then have been true that there was nothing. Would there have been a truthmaker for this truth? – If so, there would have been something, and not rather nothing. Contradiction.

One principle or the other has to be compromised. Stick to the demand for truthmakers and compromise combinatorialism, and you will be led to Armstrong's world of states of affairs, or to something very like it. (Armstrong's book is exemplary in the justice it does to nearby alternatives to his own system.) You can hold on, as Armstrong does, to a limited version of combinatorialism which pertains only to the independence of distinct states of affairs. But you cannot hold on to the sort of combinatorialism which is denied by the necessary connection between B and the intrinsic character of A, nor can you accept any combinatorial argument for the possibility that nothing exists.

Stick to uncompromising combinatorialism, and deny that predications need truthmakers, and you will have no good reason to believe in states of affairs at all, still less to believe any of what Armstrong says about them. Some other aspects of Armstrong's system are nevertheless left standing: most importantly, his distinctive conception of (fundamental) properties as contingently existing beings with multiple locations in space and time.

The need to choose between combinatorialism and truthmaking is not widely acknowledged. But it is a real fork in the road: both directions beckon, but we cannot take both. Thanks to Armstrong's excellent book, we know much better than before what lies ahead if we choose truthmaking and foresake combinatorialism.

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Writing Again

It's climbing back into the little tent where only a thin glow of cloth keeps out the open firmament – stretched like a membrane, like an ear shivering: delicate blows of air: noises of land, scents upon ocean's breath, and above all the fume of time slowed almost to anchor like a fleet of clouds, while the blue cylinder uncoils as words.

ALISTAIR ELLIOT